

# Occurrence of White-tailed Swallow *Hirundo megaensis* near Negele, Ethiopia

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Présence de l'Hirondelle à queue blanche *Hirundo megaensis* près de Negele, Éthiopie. Les auteurs présentent des observations récentes de l'Hirondelle à queue blanche *Hirundo megaensis* dans la plaine de Liben, près de Negele, Éthiopie du sud. Jusqu'à présent cette espèce globalement menacée y a été observée (et quelques fois photographiée) en juin et octobre–février, mais il reste à confirmer qu'elle est sédentaire dans la région, comme l'affirment des habitants locaux. Des observations supplémentaires devraient essayer de vérifier si l'espèce est résidente dans la zone et si elle est présente dans d'autres zones situées entre la plaine de Liben et son aire de distribution connue antérieurement, dans la région de Yabelo–Mega à environ 120 km vers le sud-ouest.

White-tailed Swallow *Hirundo megaensis* (Vulnerable: BirdLife International 2006a) has one of the smallest ranges of any hirundine, being confined to c.5,500 km<sup>2</sup> of arid, open *Acacia–Commiphora* savanna and scrub in the Yabelo–Mega region of southern Ethiopia (Fig. 1; BirdLife International 2006a, Mellanby *et al.* in press). This range overlaps almost perfectly with

that of Ethiopian Bush Crow *Zavattariornis stresemanni* (Endangered: BirdLife International 2006b) and the ecological causes of these curiously restricted and coincident ranges are unknown and intriguing (Collar & Stuart 1985).

The Liben Plains, 10 km east of the town of Negele in Ethiopia's southern Borana Zone, form another site of significant endemism. They com-

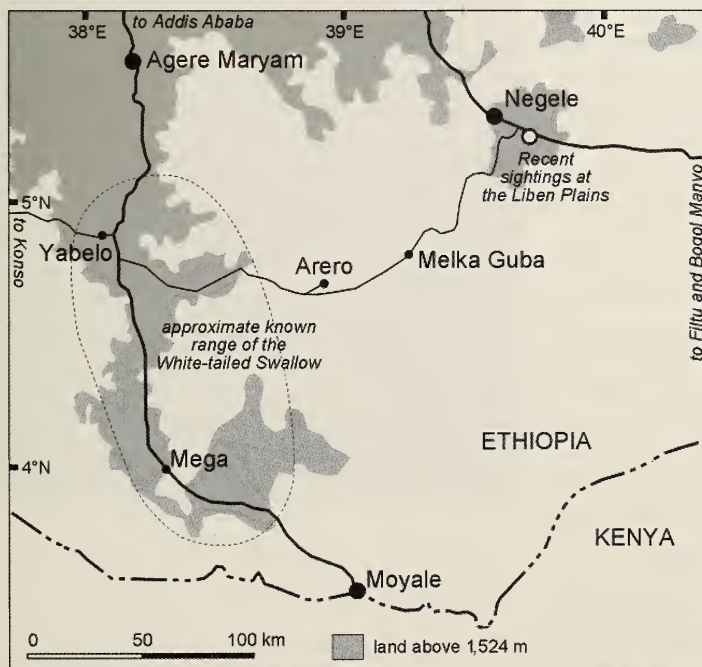


Figure 1. Map of the Yabelo–Negele region, southern Ethiopia, showing the approximate previously known range of the White-tailed Swallow *Hirundo megaensis*, and the sightings reported here.

Carte de la région de Yabelo–Negele, Éthiopie du sud, avec l'aire de distribution antérieure de l'Hirondelle à queue blanche *Hirundo megaensis*, et les observations rapportées ici.

prise the known world range of Sidamo Lark *Heteromirafra sidamoensis* (Endangered: BirdLife International 2006c) and consist of a well-defined, isolated area of open, gently sloping grassland at c.1,650 m, with a total span of c.10 × 20 km and bordered to the west, south and east by denser *Acacia-Commiphora* thornbush, cleared in places for cultivation. The vegetation is predominantly short open grass in which *Themeda triandra*, *Cymbopogon* sp., *Hyparrhenia* sp. and *Chloris* sp. are conspicuous elements. There are also widely scattered small thorn bushes (mainly whistling-thorn *Acacia drepanolobium*), numerous herbaceous plants and areas of bare ground created by the high density of harvester ant *Messor cephalotes* nests, overgrazing and cattle drove lines. Three decades ago it still held antelope such as Beisa Oryx *Oryx beisa* and Grant's Gazelle *Gazella granti* (Ash & Olson 1985) but since at least the early 1990s (Robertson 1995) the only large ungulates are the substantial numbers of cattle based at the numerous small villages and homesteads scattered over the plains, part of which was formerly a military training ground (now largely abandoned) (Robertson 1995, EWNHS 2001). C. W. Benson, the discoverer of the White-tailed Swallow, visited the Negele area in the 1940s and commented that although it looked suitable for this species he recorded none (Benson 1946). Here we report numerous independent sightings of White-tailed Swallows on the Liben Plains, which, if a regular occurrence, would extend the known range of the species north-east by c.120 km.

On 29 June 2006 (at 14.30–17.30 hrs), 23 km south-east of Negele, MNG, CNS, DP and LF watched several loose groups of White-tailed Swallows foraging around herds of cattle being driven south from an artificial waterbody in the centre of the plains—known as Abaya—towards a village called Ariro. The first herd was being followed by c.5 White-tailed Swallows (Fig. 2a). We then walked to meet two other cattle herds, each of which had three White-tailed Swallows in attendance. Two individuals were subsequently seen flying singly, away from the cattle. The group of five included at least one immature (Fig. 2b), distinguished by a duller grey tone (interspersed with whitish feathers or feather fringes) to its metallic blue head and upperparts; this is consistent with the April–May breeding season reported from Yabelo (Holtam 1998, EWNHS 2001). The

swallows were clearly feeding in association with the cattle, closely following the fairly rapidly moving herds, and swooping down among the animals. One or two individuals perched briefly on low bushes or tall herbs (Fig. 2b). The birds were silent throughout. The area within which the birds were seen was c.2 × 2 km, centred on 05°15'N 39°46'E, and is locally known as Asido.

The birds were distinguished from Ethiopian Swallow *H. aethiopica* (at least two of which were also seen at the site on the same day) by the extensive area of white visible on the uppertail, and the unmarked white throat lacking a black semi-collar (Fig. 2). The same features distinguished them from the larger Barn Swallow *H. rustica*, a few of which were seen nearby on 3 July (see below).

On the same day, MNG interviewed a group of Borana herdsmen 'driving' one of the groups of cattle, who recognised the swallows, specifically pointing out their white tails. They used the term 'raree' for them, which is also used for the species in Yabelo but refers to swallows in general (and to bats) rather than to White-tailed Swallow in particular (Holtam 1998). They reported that they saw this bird with a white tail during all months of the year, commonly following cattle, and that, although they had seen individuals collecting mud, they did not know where the birds nested.

These sightings prompted MNG, CNS and LF to return to the Liben Plains on 3 July 2006, and to spend a full day walking from the Arero turn-off near the western border east to where the swallows had been seen on 29 June. We checked all cattle herds encountered and visited the watering hole mentioned above, at which they were concentrated. The only swallows seen were a handful of Barn Swallows. Moreover, on 2 October 2006, MNG, CNS and Callan Cohen visited the Liben Plains again and made a particular effort to scan herds of cows for swallows, but again saw only Barn Swallows. Similarly, MNG, CNS *et al.* spent eight days on the Liben Plains surveying Sidamo Larks in June 2007 and saw no White-tailed Swallows.

However, since then further records of White-tailed Swallow at this locality have been made (and one previous observation has come to light), all made 9–20 km from Negele, along the road to Bogol Manyo, on the Liben Plains and its wooded fringes, as follows: (1) five on 29 January 2005 (EF *et al.*), two adults and seven immatures on 31



**Figure 2.** White-tailed Swallows *Hirundo megaensis* at the Liben Plains, Ethiopia, on 29 June 2006: (a) several individuals in flight over herds of cattle, showing their diagnostic white rectrices, and (b) a perched immature (Claire N. Spottiswoode)

Hirondelles à queue blanche *Hirundo megaensis* sur la plaine de Liben, Éthiopie, le 29 juin 2006 : (a) plusieurs individus en vol au-dessus de troupeaux de bétail, déployant leurs rectrices blanches diagnostiques, et (b) un immature perché (Claire N. Spottiswoode)

October 2006 (AL), eight on 23 October 2006 (MNG *et al.*), one on 29 November 2006 (NT *et al.*), three on 1 December 2006 (RT, who saw no cattle in the vicinity), one on 5 February 2007 (MNG *et al.*), and two on 2 January 2008 (NT *et al.*).

Were these sightings of White-tailed Swallows, recorded in most seasons except the breeding season (April–May), merely on passage? If so, to and from where? Could the species be a partial migrant or show limited post-breeding dispersal? Despite our failure to find birds on 3 July and 2 October 2006, and in June 2007, the contrasting seasonality of the several sightings and local people's assertions do raise the possibility that the species might regularly occur at the Liben Plains.

The open grassland where the birds were seen at Negele contrasts with the habitat in the Yabelo–Mega region, where naturally open grasslands do not exist and the species instead frequents a wide range of wooded habitats, from open *Acacia* savanna to fairly dense *Acacia–Commiphora* thornbush, and is commonest in open areas with sparse scrub and tree cover such as grazed areas around villages (Mellanby *et al.* in press). Another potentially important difference between the Yabelo area and the Liben Plains is the latter's lack of tall, columnar termite mounds. Termite mounds have been suggested to be at least the ancestral nesting sites of White-tailed Swallows (Benson 1946), although the only reported nests were on buildings and in deep traditional wells (Holtam 1998).

It would be very interesting to establish this species' seasonality

and regularity at the Liben Plains, and to conduct surveys between Negele and Arero (the easternmost boundary of the previously known range) to discover whether there is a continuous population between Negele and the Yabelo–Mega region. Certainly, the Liben Plains form a strikingly isolated habitat and it is by no means clear that the rather dense *Acacia–Commiphora* thornbush between there and Arero is appropriate habitat for the swallow. If it does occur regularly in the Negele area and elsewhere, then its world range could be enlarged by perhaps a factor of two (Fig. 1), which would probably have implications for its conservation status. We urge birders searching for Sidamo Larks or en route to Bogol Manyo to pause and check cattle herds, and any swallows seen on the Liben Plains.

### Acknowledgements

We thank Nigel Collar for comments, whilst CNS's visits to Ethiopia were supported by Julian Francis.

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Received 10 March 2008; revision accepted 5 June 2008.